

Parshat Vayetzei, *Mah Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter, 2011

When coaching students to write a dvar Torah, we often suggest that they read the parsha again, even if they feel they know it well. There is always something new to find, we say. My own training, as I learned from my teachers, is to ask new questions of the text. What is strange or curious about this text? What do you find odd? Inevitably, those questions lead us to new insights about passages we may have seen many times before.

It was with this goal—to look for things I had not noticed-- that I approached the story of Jacob's journey in Vayetzei. For the first time in all my readings of this parsha, I noticed a strange repetition of the word "*even*"—rock. This simple word—this simple noun-- seems to frame Jacob's life story in this parsha. At the start of the reading, Jacob takes some stones from the place and puts them around his head in order to sleep. Next morning, he sets up a monument in that place with a stone and then goes to help Rachel get water from the well-- by moving the stone that is blocking it. Finally, Jacob gathers stones in a mound that will act as a witness to the treaty he establishes with Lavan at the end of the parsha.

What a strange leitmotif in Jacob's life... rocks! What could be more basic, or more non-descript? And yet, when Jacob awakens, he realizes that this simple place of rocks is actually a holy place. "Ah! God was in this place, and I did not know it!" The Talmud in Masechet Pesachim tells us that the place where Jacob slept is actually Mount Moriah, the place where Temple will be built many generations later. These simple rocks become the spiritual center of the universe, the location of the *Even Shtiyah*, the Foundation Stone upon which the Beit Hamikdash is established.

Simple rocks are not always what they seem. When we think about it more deeply, rocks are actually an interesting part of the natural world. On first glance, few aspects of nature seem to demand as little notice as rocks. They seem to be all around us, something to kick around, to step over as we try to move towards another goal. And yet, when we look more closely, some rocks turn out to be extraordinarily precious, fetching huge sums as they become the centerpieces of the most magnificent jewelry or adornments.

Take a second look, Jacob's life reminds us. As readers, we can't afford to just assume we know a text. We have to look again and find the gems that we might once have missed. And how much more so is this further investigation essential when it comes to the people around us. We may think we already know some of the people in our life, seeing them as known quantities or just part of the landscape, when in fact, we may be overlooking precious stones that could show us a new aspect of God's place in our world. As the Psalmist teaches, "The rock which the builders despised has become the cornerstone."

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, presents this idea exactly, suggesting that the stones of Jacob's life teach us to "return to what we neglected." Jacob—and his rocks--reminds us that we never know when or where we may discover God's presence. Lying right upon our path—disguised as a basic stone—may be the foundation of our entire universe.